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ABSTRACT

Noting that researchers in the fields of cognitive psychology, artificial intelligence, and linguistics are taking a constructivist view of reading comprehension, this paper undertakes a comparison of that view with views concerning comprehension that have been expressed at the Claremont Reading Conferences over the past 50 years. The first section of the paper lists four assumptions basic to the constructivist view of comprehension: (1) what one knows affects what he or she will learn from reading; (2) both concept-driven and data-driven processes are necessary in comprehension; (3) the deeper one processes text, the more it will be remembered; and (4) context influences what is recalled. This section points out that teaching practices following from this view call for activating those concepts (schemata) that are related to the reading material, predicting what will follow, engaging in mental imagery, monitoring predictions, and revising. The second section of the paper reviews the various views of reading comprehension that have been offered by speakers at the Claremont Reading Conference since its inception. It concludes that these views are remarkably compatible with the constructivist theory. The final section of the paper discusses practices that are consistent with the previously discussed views. (A computer program flowchart for reading comprehension is appended.) (FL)

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A Janus Look At Reading Comprehension

John D. McNeil

There is an unprecedented interest in reading comprehension. Part of the interest comes from the current work of cognitive psychologists, scholars in artificial intelligence, and students of linguistics. Researchers in these disciplines are using a constructive view of reading comprehension holding that individuals actively construct the form and content of their own experience. Another source of interest is political. There is public concern that pupils are not learning to comprehend their textbooks and the reading materials of everyday life.

My purpose in this paper is to compare current views of the constructivists and the views of reading comprehension as expressed for many years at the Claremont Reading Conferences. An array of instructional practices consistent with the constructivist perspective is presented.

A Forward Look: The Constructivist Paradigm

According to constructivists, reading comprehension is a process by which one actively constructs meaning from among parts of the text and between the text and one's own experience. Basic to the constructivist paradigm are four assumptions:

1) What one knows affects what one will learn from reading. (Prior knowledge interacts with text in the creation of meaning.)
2) Both concept-driven and data-driven processes are necessary in comprehension. (On one hand, the reader's purposes and expectations guide one in monitoring reading; on the other hand, by attending to text new expectations are suggested.)

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3) The deeper one processes text, the more it will be remembered. (Retention is greater when text is elaborated by relating it to one's own experiences and purposes and when facts within a text are connected to abstractions.)

4) Context influences what is recalled. (One's perceptions and interests determine what is selected from text as well as how statements are interpreted.)

Although these assumptions may appear commonplace, much current teaching indicates that they are not. Conflicting practices include using formulas which purport to assess difficulty without regard to the learner's familiarity and interest; the presenting of brief passages followed by multiple choices, one of which is said to be the correct meaning; and the failure to provide for pupil initiated questions in teachers' manuals.

Practices that follow from the constructivist paradigm call for activating those concepts (schemata) that are related to the reading material, predicting what will follow, engaging in mental imagery and other elaborations, monitoring reading by confirming one's predictions, and revising.

A Review of the Past: The Claremont Concept of Reading

What has been the perspective of reading comprehension as expressed by presenters at the Claremont Conferences during the past 50 years? To what extent is this perspective in agreement with the views of today's constructivists? How has the perspective differed from the customary and dominant view of reading text as reproduction whereby meaning is assumed to be in the text, not in an interaction between author and

reader? I sought answers to these questions by reviewing the yearbooks of the Claremont Reading Conference from 1936 to 1982.

I was surprised. Many of the Claremont presenters were 50 years ahead of their time. Dr. Peter L. Spencer, initiator of the conference, had ideas that are consistent with those of today's constructionists. He saw reading and concept building as the same process. Spencer in the 1936 yearbook defined reading as the process of making meaningful reactions and interpreting in light of one's own goals. Through the years, Spencer stressed that words were not ideas--that ideas could not be extracted from symbols because symbols are not ideas. Readers must have the concepts which the symbols represent in order to create meaning to go with the symbols. Accordingly, one cannot be taught to read in isolation from content.

Content can be found in all contexts--music, math, literature, law, and people. Indeed, the surfaces of daily life are texts to be read. Hence reading is never learned in the sense that it can no longer be improved. Students may be capable in reading effectively in one field but less effective in another. In contrast with the dominant point of view--that reading is simply a matter of learning to pronounce words by associating symbols with sounds, Spencer equated reading with education itself, admonishing that pupils needed ideas more than workbooks and that ideas are best acquired through direct experience.

Others who addressed the Claremont Conferences reinforced the Claremont concept of reading. In 1936 Louise Balmer defined reading as the process of making meaninful reactions. Louis Jacques in 1937 emphasized creating meaning from text and pointed out how the meaning of a selection was greater than the sum of its parts. In 1938, Beth Barry

reiterated the importance of experiential background in reading and showed how the retelling of stories could aid in the teaching of reading. Her words anticipated the forward view, "Reading is bringing meaning to the page as well as getting meaning from it." Similarly, William Burton described a good reading program as one where pupils were not "getting meaning" but "bringing meaning" from their own experiences.

Throughout most Claremont Conferences, Gestalt psychology with an emphasis upon seeing the whole and not just a part in isolation, and a theory of semantics served to remind speakers and audience of the need to find relationships and meaning in text.

At the 1952 Conference Edgar Dale used the acronym COIK, clear only if known. He illustrated how one could follow directions only if the referents were already familiar. At other conferences speakers gave examples of how to use the known as bridges to the unknown. Margureite Brydegaard, for instance, showed how primary pupils comprehended the relationship among dividend, divisor, and quotient by first likening the dividend to a cake (the constant quantity), the divisor to the number of persons present, and the quotient to the amount of cake each person would get.

John Carroll's presentation at the 1969 conference reexamined the concept of comprehension and compared it with the concept of inference. He said the literal sense of what is read is comprehension and the infering of deeper meanings that are not explicitly stated is inference. Comprehension and inference are necessary for the apprehension of meaning. Carroll's recommendation that teachers try to make children aware of the difference in the two concepts is consistent with the constructionist view that the deriving of meaning in a paragraph transcends understanding

of the literal text. Constructivists have acted in accordance with Carroll's recommendation and are teaching pupils how to recognize the source of information required for an answer--text explicit, text implicit, or from one's own knowledge-schema implicit. Carroll also suggested that inferences could be enhanced by teaching children to attend to linguistic clues, to "put two and two together" in arriving at a new conclusion, and to draw from their own experience.

I would be remiss not to recognize Dr. Malcolm P. Douglass's contribution to the Claremont concept of reading. His leadership in organizing the conferences, his insights into the comprehension of social studies, and his persistent effort to establish a tenable theory of reading that accounts for the complexity of the process are noteworthy.

Briefly then, a Janus look at the Claremont Reading Conferences and the current views of constructivists shows a remarkable concord. Both recognize the centrality of prior experience and concepts (schemata) in the reading process. Both regard comprehension as the construction and creation of meaning rather than mere reproduction.

Practices that are Consistent with the Claremont and Constructivist Perspectives

There are indicators that the Claremont and constructivist views are being implemented. The following abbreviated outline taken from a flowchart for the teaching of reading comprehension from a constructivist view is illustrative. The outline represents an utilization framework for teaching pupils to read narrative and exposition. The components are presented as they might occur before, during and after reading. Each represents a strategy for teaching and reading.

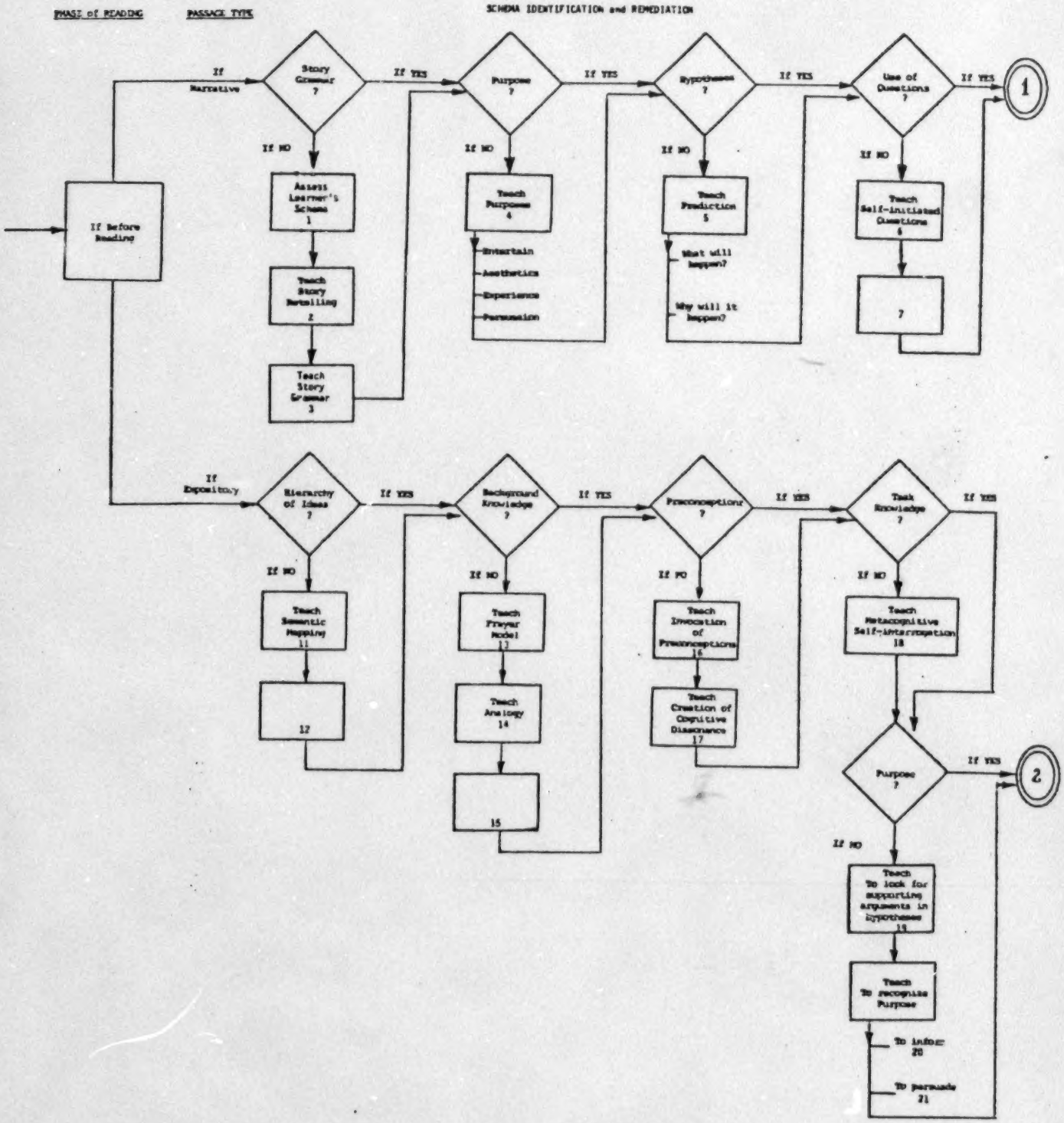
In order to "read" the outline, you should be familiar with the instructional and learning strategies that go with the labels. A brief explanation may help:

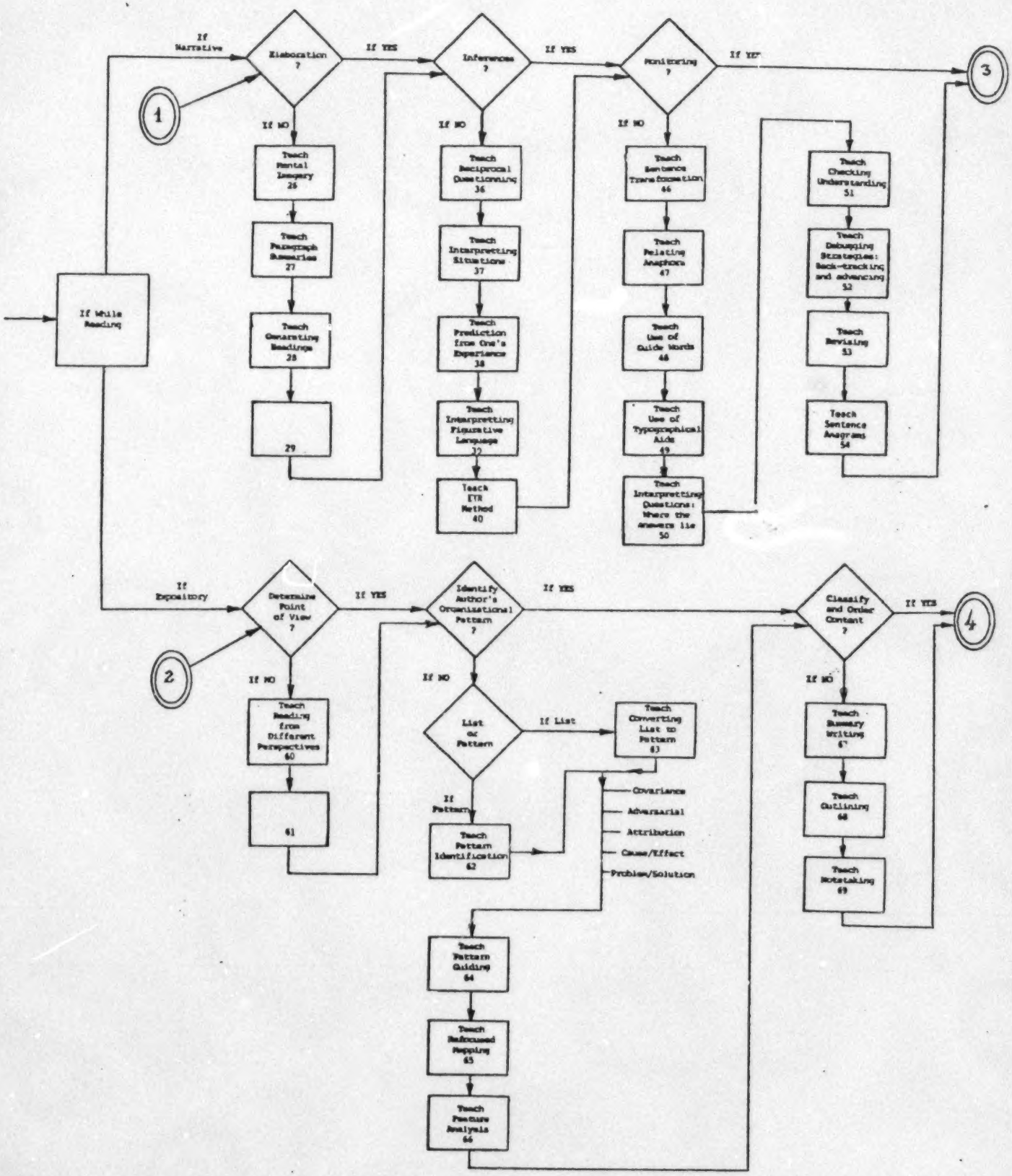
In reading narrative, the concept of story grammar--setting, initiating events, plans of action, ending--is important. Assessment of the child's schema for strong grammar and other aspects of reading may occur through retelling of stories. Self-initiated questions include making predictions and reading for one's own purposes. Such questions are motivating, and helpful in monitoring one's reading. Elaboration means interpreting text with existing knowledge. Mental imagery is a form of elaboration. In monitoring the reading process, one strategy calls for knowing where the answer to questions lie. Checking and debugging refer to confirming one's predictions, revising, rereading, and knowing when to read on for further clarification. In addition to assessing the child's conception of reading, story telling is a technique for revealing the meanings children derive from their reading. Questions that integrate the story are more beneficial for comprehension more than questions of detail which fragmentize.

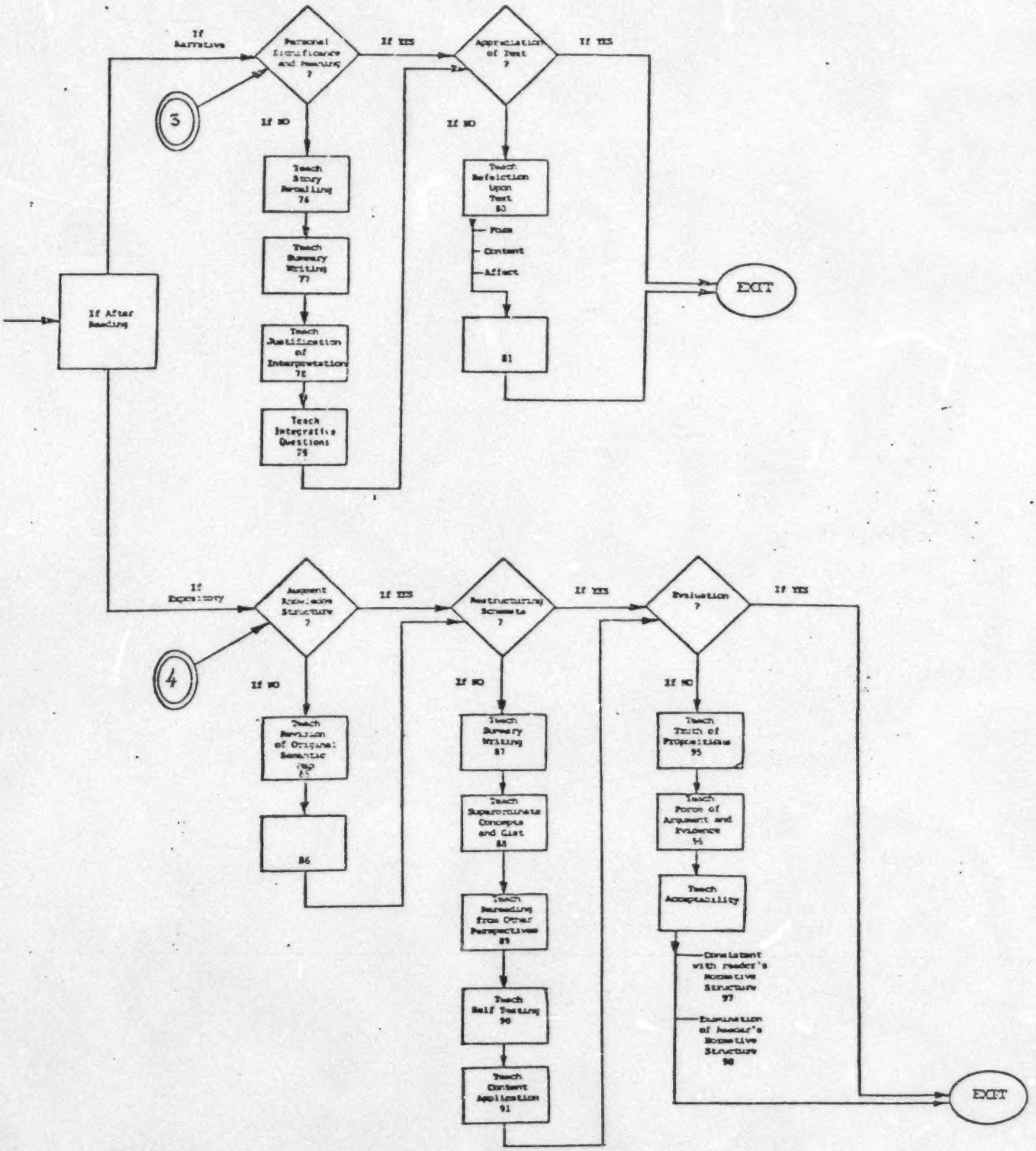
In teaching pupils to read exposition, it is important to know the reader's preconceptions, particularly those that will prevent the reader from accepting the content. Strategies for creating cognitive dissonance and dealing with it are available. These strategies expose preconceptions and offer alternative frameworks. Critical incidents and semantic mapping are cases in point. The use of analogy for bridging the known to the new, the Frayer model for developing and relating concepts within a subject matter hierarchy are also important techniques. Metacognitive strategies by which the child independently solves reading tasks are most

promising. The rereading of a work from different perspectives adds to the meanings created and helps one to modify preconceptions. Teaching pupils to identify organizational patterns used in expository writing and having pupils convert a simple and less meaningful listing pattern to a more productive cause and effect on compare and contrast pattern has been found to be effective. Similarly, applying the six rules for composing a summary results in better summaries and greater comprehension of text. The revision of a semantic map after reading helps one integrate and retain new information.

Computer Program Flowchart for Reading Comprehension




If While Reading
If Narrative
Elaboration ?
If YES
Inferences ?
If YES
Monitoring ?
If YES
3
1
If NO
Teach Mental Imagery 26
Teach Paragraph Summaries 27
Teach Generating Headings 28
29
If NO
Teach Reciprocal Questioning 36
Teach Interpreting Situations 37
Teach Prediction from One's Experience 38
Teach Interpreting Figurative Language 32
Teach ETR Method 40
If NO
Teach Sentence Transformation 46
Teach Relating Anaphora 47
Teach Use of Guide Words 48
Teach Use of Typographical Aids 49
Teach Interpreting Questions: Where the Answers Lie 50
Teach Checking Understanding 51
Teach Debugging Strategies: Back-tracking and advancing 52
Teach Revising 53
Teach Sentence Anagrams 54
If Expository
Determine Point of View ?
If YES
Identify Author's Organizational Pattern ?
If YES
Classify and Order Content ?
If YES
4
2
If NO
Teach Reading from Different Perspectives 60
61
If NO
List or Pattern
If List
Teach Converting List to Pattern 63
If Pattern
Teach Pattern Identification 62
Covariance
Adversarial
Attribution
Cause/Effect
Problem/Solution
Teach Pattern Guiding 64
Teach Enhanced Mapping 65
Teach Feature Analysis 66
If NO
Teach Summary Writing 67
Teach Outlining 68
Teach Notetaking 69


If Narrative
Personal Significance and Meaning ?
If YES
Appreciation of Text ?
If YES
3
If NO
If NO
Teach Story Recalling 76
Teach Summary Writing 77
Teach Justification of Interpretation 78
Teach Integrative Questions 79
Teach Reflection Upon Text 80
Form
Content
Affect
81
EXIT
If After Reading
If Expository
Augment Knowledge Structure ?
If YES
Restructuring Schemata ?
If YES
Evaluation ?
If YES
4
If NO
If NO
If NO
Teach Revision of Original Semantic 82 83
86
Teach Summary Writing 87
Teach Superordinate Concepts and Gist 88
Teach Rereading from Other Perspectives 89
Teach Self Testing 90
Teach Content Application 91
Teach Truth of Propositions 95
Teach Form of Argument and Evidence 96
Teach Acceptability
Consistent with reader's Normative Structure 97
Explanation of Reader's Normative Structure 98
EXIT